

J **ESSAY—William Safire**

Enough Already

WASHINGTON

Three headaches demand attention:**1. The White House Headache.**

The truth is too awful to admit: Ronald Reagan, condemner of Desert One, basher of Qaddafi, exemplar of tall standing, turned out to be a softy on terrorism.

The geopolitical excuse offered now — that the ransom was a plan to influence post-Khomeini Iran — is a feeble cover-up. Robert McFarlane first approached the Reagan campaign in the summer of 1980 with an Iranian in tow who proposed to deliver our hostages to Mr. Reagan rather than President Carter, thereby swinging the U.S. election. The Reagan representatives properly recoiled, but Mr. McFarlane has had Iranian-held hostages on the brain ever since.

If Mr. Reagan had chosen to admit that hostage dickering was the reason for his Iranian arms shipments, his secret "finding" deferring notification would not have caused much trouble with Congress; but by creating the alibi of a secret foreign policy initiative and intelligence operation, the President is now in the position of having avoided lawful oversight and offended comity. The foam of high strategy poured over the public opinion firestorm has created a lingering political nightmare.

2. The Republican Headache.

Where is George Bush in all this? The President's chief crisis manager, a former C.I.A. director, was surely aware that our support of Iran would induce the Saudis to double-cross the Iraqis by raising oil prices; that event was devoutly wished by Bush supporters in Texas.

Yet in all the "distancing," Mr. Bush seems most distant of all. Was

My button: 'Nobody's perfect'

the Vice President aligned with Secretaries Shultz and Weinberger in opposition to the arms hypocrisy, or did he stand with the McFarlane-Poindexter-Casey crowd appealing to the President's sentimentality?

If loyalty to Mr. Reagan is George Bush's big *schtick*, now is the time for the Vice President to come to his aid at whatever cost to his own popularity. That is what Vice Presidents are for. Yet any identification with either the hypocrisy or its defense would "taint" the potential candidate in 1988, and that fear is what causes many Republican temples to pound.

3. My personal headache. What is a right-wing pundit to do when he finds himself singing bass in the shrill chorus of Jimmy Carter, George McGovern, King Hussein, Mary McGrory and assorted mullahs, media biggies and blame-America-firsters denouncing Ronald Reagan?

My natural place is on the burning deck next to the bleeding Captain. It is one thing for right-wingers to zap the President for slouching toward Reykjavik and betting the company in an all-night strategic poker game, but when he is wounded — and his White House staff paralyzed and unwilling to walk the necessary plank — then his old supporters are well advised to eschew easy derision and offer sympathetic advice.

The President should stop trying to cover up the hostage ransom by calling it a "strategic initiative." That won't fly because it (a) is untrue and (b) offers investigating Democrats and doves a club with which to smash the Administration for months. Being President means not having to say you're sorry, but neither should a President be forced to defend the indefensible.

What, then, to do? Drop the out-of-character bitterness, such as blaming the press for not having all the hostages out; appoint Don Regan czar of a Wall Street cleanup and give a ship of his own to John Poindexter, the most disaster-prone admiral since Husband Kimmel; ignore the foolishness from the frightened Casey crowd to replace Mr. Shultz with Mr. Weinberger (you need Secretary Shultz now as Mr. Nixon needed Secretary Kissinger); and try to change the subject.

Longtime admirers and occasional critics will help. We will remind each other that Mr. Reagan stopped inflation and brought down interest rates, scuttled the Law of the Sea treaty, turned the tide in Central America, and introduced the space defense idea that makes disarmament possible — all over the objections of those who now gleefully try to drag him down.

So what if Ronald Reagan doubled the deficit and turned squishy-soft on hostage ransom? My button says "nobody's perfect." And luck can turn: the Ayatollah could die, the young Shah take over, and Ardeshir Zahedi come to Washington to say Ronald Reagan's initiative did it all.

Therefore, I will alleviate my headache by supporting my local President wherever possible. A lame duck is better than a dead duck. □